

County calls for Pepco Investigation

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By Paige L. Hill

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Montgomery County Council members are demanding answers from Pepco after another lengthy repair project following the July 25 thunderstorm that left more than 300,000 people in the area without power. The council sent a public letter to the Maryland Public Service Commission's Chairman Douglas R.M. Nazarian asking for an investigation into the reliability of Pepco's electricity system and criticizing the provider's current system for dealing with outages.

"Our residents and businesses have suffered an unacceptable number and duration of outages that have harmed public health, public safety and the county's economy," the council wrote. The letter also acknowledges what Council President Nancy Floreen (D-At large) has called "the trifecta:" the large amount of winter snowfall, the earthquake and the most recent thunderstorm.

"However, the extreme results this storm produced highlighted the underlying reality that the distribution system in Montgomery County is extremely vulnerable," the letter states.

"Even on cloudless, idyllic days, our residents have experienced unexplained outages."

"The area is heavily populated and covered in trees," Pepco spokeswoman Marybeth Hutchinson said following the July 25 storm. "That combo can mean when a storm whips through, the leaves act like a sail and take down the power lines in their path."

But the council had questions about this theory, too.

"We also recognize that our county and our citizens value our tree canopy and that trees are often blamed for outages," the council wrote. "But that simplistic response begs the question — what are the full range of measures necessary to bring our system to a level of reliability that meets the legitimate needs of our community, including measures that mitigate the impact of trees?"

Pepco officials stood before the council July 27 to discuss the slow repair process and what could be done in the future.

"They said they might be able to underground parts of the system that experience outages the most," said Councilman Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1), who represents the area with the highest number of regular outages: Bethesda. "I hope that's the solution, I'm not positive it is."

Hutchinson said running the lines underground is an option but an expensive one — it would cost as much as \$15 million per mile to bury existing power lines. Hutchinson estimated that if all overhead power lines in the county were buried, it could run as high a tab as \$21 billion and that the cost would be passed on to customers.

"I really believe that residents would be willing to pay for these extra costs if it meant long-term results," Berliner said.

For Berliner, an environmental and energy lawyer for more than 20 years, this letter is not his first attempt to bring attention to the problem. As recently as July 12, Berliner sent a public letter to the energy company openly questioning why there have been "so many outages that appear to be unrelated to wires downed by trees."

"Why are my constituents suffering more outages on a regular basis than other places in the country like the Midwest where they experience so much more weather?" Berliner said in an interview.

But the truth is, according to Berliner, the council cannot begin an investigation on its own. It must rely on those at the state level to begin such an investigation.

"Our letter is meant to bring attention to this issue since we ourselves cannot open the investigation we'd like to conduct," Berliner said.

County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett followed up the council's letter with one of his own on July 29, criticizing the oft-repeated response from Pepco CEO Joseph Rigby and Pepco's media relations team:

"Everything is status quo."

“Plainly put, the status quo is unacceptable,” wrote Leggett, who has since formed a work group to study Pepco’s “poor service” and says he hopes the added oversight will begin Pepco’s improvement process.

Something we forget is that Pepco is just the distribution company,” Berliner said. “They do not generate the power, they simply deliver it to us — that’s all they have to focus on, and their delivery service is sub-par.”

As recently as Wednesday, residents awoke after a nighttime rainstorm to find more outages, especially along Connecticut Avenue in Chevy Chase, where several traffic signals were out and police officers directed traffic.

Pepco did not comment on the potential investigation.